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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the ways in which families operate as a unit while presenting a story to an interviewer, and the ways in which they interface with the outside world, as represented by the interviewer. A description of the study is preceded by an overview of relevant literature, including studies that concerned microsocial analyses, shared family constructs, family stories, and research interviewing. The design of the study involved four steps. First, two stories about stressful family events were elicited from 44 families. The family as a group described to an interviewer how it reacted to the events. Second, a theory of family regulation as manifested through the storytelling process was constructed. Third, descriptors for evaluating family interaction were chosen. These included family communication, boundary maintenance, cohesiveness, vitality, flexibility, and humor. Fourth, a coding protocol for assessing levels of behavior, meaning, and memory in the storytelling process was developed. Dimensions coded included: (1) the family's self-presentation; (2) the family's relations with the outside world; (3) intrafamily connectedness; (4) story structure; and (5) family affirmation and closure. Family continuity was also assessed. At the time of presentation of this paper, preliminary data analyses were still proceeding. A reference list of 27 items is included. (BC)

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The Family's Construction of Past Stressors: Clues in the Measurement of Family Stories

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Introduction

The family is a dynamic and self-regulating entity whose shared interpretive processes (such as beliefs, values, perceptions and central norms) create a working model or world view to help the family make sense of the world in which it lives (Reiss, 1981). This mutual construction of reality helps shape patterned behavioral sequences such as those manifested in family communication, boundary maintenance, and problem-solving (Berg, 1985; Constantine, 1986; Hess & Handel, 1959; Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Reiss, 1989).

Models of interaction patterns generally rely on observing the functional links between sequentially ordered behavioral chains. We emphasize the role played by the interpretive process within and between families and between families and researchers, in shaping these interactions. Our project is an effort to address both levels as we show ways in which functional links among behaviors and interpretive components fit together. In addition, by incorporating the interpretive process as an important key to assessing family regulation over time, we can explore continuity in family behavior and the influence of family memories both within and between generations.

Family narratives (which are family stories elicited through a systematic and semi-structured interview) offer a window through which the relationships among behavior, meaning, and memory can be observed. In our study,the entire family group works together to construct an account of how it coped with two stressors. As the family creates its story, and as it presents this story to the interviewer (or listener), we are able to investigate how the family operates as a unit and how it interfaces with the outside world (as represented by the listener). In addition, we can examine how aspects of the family's belief system and heritage are manifested during the narrative's construction, and shown in the family's retrospective account of how the stressors were initially perceived and processed.

It follows that in order to accomplish this shift of interest where the interpretive aspect is not only included but also emphasized, a new method, and not simply creation of new coding categories or descriptions, will be required. We also stress the

importance of the mutually-reinforcing interaction between the family and the listener and incorporate the reactions of the researcher who evaluates the transcribed narratives at a later date. Therefore, the new coding method addresses the co-constructed and mutually interpretive aspects of: (a) within-family process (e.g. creation of the narrative among family members during the interview); (b) the relationship between the family and the external world as represented by the listener; (c) the listener's interaction with the family during the narration, and (d) the coder's objective and subjective evaluations of family processes.

Specific portions of the project: how the narratives were elicited in an earlier study by Oliveri and Reiss; the indicators and descriptors we have selected which evaluate behavioral and interpretive aspects of family process, and measurement and reliability issues will be discussed in depth later in the paper. At this point, we would like to include a brief synopsis of one of the narratives we are evaluating to help clarify what we mean by a family story. The Smith family (Mom, Dad, and their adolescent children, John and Ann), is asked make a group decision regarding which event (chosen from a pre-determined list) it would like to discuss with the interviewer. After selecting the event, members tell how the family coped with the stressor (in this case, "Family's Pet Dies") during an approximately one hour interview. (The group will select a second event to discuss for another hour after it is finished telling the first story.) The listener has a few key questions to ask during the course of the narration, but generally allows the family free reign to describe the event in its own words as long as it is able to do so.

After a false start or two, family members begin to recount the story of how they adopted a sick, old, stray cat, attempted to nurse him back to health, and (when that was out of the question) tried to give him as peaceful a death as possible. The family is occasionally quite lively and animated. Ms. Smith and John have more to say than Mr. Smith and Ann, but each person agrees that the cat's illness and death had an impact on the entire family. The narrative is fairly full of detail, and one can almost picture this mangy and tired cat

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being lovingly ministered to by various family members. Mr. Smith a Ann tell, in a humorous vignette, how upset the family cat was about all the attention given to this ailing newcomer. At the end of an hour, the family looks back and evaluates how it handled the situation, and everyone agrees: "We wish we could have made the cat well, but we did all we could."

The family treats the listener with moderate ease and warmth, an each member is so eager to let the listener know the various things she/he did to try to help the cat that sometimes everyone talks at once. The listener makes a few supportive and/or affirmative comments, such as "I can see you really cared about that cat!" She asks the necessary questions (e.g. "Do you think there were any changes in your family as a result of taking care of this cat?") without making it seem as if she's just checking off another required item.

The coder who reads the verbatim transcript of the discussion ha some trouble following the story at times, but is more or less able to get a clear picture of this family's style as shown by how the proble was interpreted and addressed at the time it happened, by how this family interacted as a group to construct the narrative, and by how it reacted to the interview situation. In addition, there are several indications of an underlying and ongoing family belief system relating to helping one another and helping others. For example, the family didn't ignore the stray cat and cared for it with compassion; Ms. Smith mentions that she volunteers in a hospice and tries to give the same type of respect to the patients there, and grandmother volunteers to come over and "keep watch" with John so he won't have to be alone if the cat dies. Indeed, some of the aspects of the family's belief system may be seen during the interview process as members help one another tell the story, and as the group tries to "help" the listener by freely answering her questions and including her in family humor.

We have chosen five dimensions which assess family process at the levels of behavior, meaning and memory: (1) How the Family Presents Itself to the Listener, (2) Family-Listener Interactions, (3) Intra-Family Connectedness, (4) Story Coherence and Richness, and (5) Family

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Affirmation and Closure. The 12 indicators (each measured on a five-point interval level scale) which describe aspects of these dimensions will be discussed in the design and method portion of the paper. The presence or absence of meaningful traditions and/or connections with the extended family in the story is also measured. The coder's impression of the family's theme or world view is noted. We are not looking for one "ideal" or "most successful" family paradigm or one "best" family score. With this in mind, we have made efforts throughout the manual to promote a non-evaluative stance whenever possible.

Three experienced coders are evaluating the narratives. Once coding reliability is established and coding is completed, relationships among the 12 indicators will be investigated and analyzed to determine if these variables can be grouped into distinctly different dimensions. The dimensions and/or their indicators can then be compared and contrasted among themselves, and associations among the dimensions and the family's underlying theme or world view explored.

We will also look for relationships among the narrative constructs and this sample's performance on the Card Sort Procedure (CSP), a laboratory-based problem-solving exercise where family members work singly and then together to sort cards with various combinations of letters into categories. Reiss (1981) devised the CSP to assess components of a family's shared constructs. These components and their relationship to this study's indicators will be presented in the following section. At this point, we would like to discuss the theoretical underpinnings for the coding method.

Overview of Relevant Literature

We can find no direct precedent for creating a method of coding family narratives which provides a way of measuring and integrating both interpretive and behavioral family processes. Therefore, guiding principles must be abstracted and synthesized from several bodies of knowledge. Each of the following areas contributes a crucial piece of the new exemplar: (a) microsocial analysis offers many examples of how observable regulatory processes in social interaction are initiated

and maintained through predictable, patterned sequences; (b) resear on shared family constructs and regulatory phenomena explores the relationships among the behavioral sequences and the interpretive processes; (c) descriptive studies of family stories show how the belief systems of families can influence family dynamics over time; (d) discourse analysis provides guidelines for choosing and abstracting indicators and offers protocols for data analysis, and (research interviewing emphasizes the mutually reinforcing interactio among all participants during the interview process.

Microsocial analysis. Microsocial analyses are based on the premise that observable sequential interactions in dyads or families recur repeatedly in a predictable fashion (Patterson, 1982). These sequential patterns operate via a feedback cycle or a closed loop causal chain (Kantor & Lehr, 1975) comprised of "...circular interrelationships that feed information from output back to input" (Constantine, 1986, p. 58). Designs aimed at measuring and analyzin these brief sequential interchanges in the family (Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Mishler & Waxler, 1975), marriages (Gottman, 1979), maternal-infant pairs (Field, 1981; Stern, 1989) and parent/child interaction (Patterson, 1982) have been developed and implemented. Patterson's data on coercive processes between sons with conduct disorders and their parents is based on extended and detailed observations of hundreds of families in their own homes. Patterson found that a predictable and mutually reinforcing cycle is created when parents respond to non-compliant, coercive, or even violent behavior in their children by selectively attending to it or by stopping their own aversive behavior in response to coercion from their offspring. For example, a father scolds his son for not doing his chores, the son whines and carries on, and the father "throws up his hands," leaves the room, and does the chores himself.

Patterson (1986) has extended research on sequential patterning of aggression from field observations and clinical studies to model building, so that the more macrosocial constructs in which these sequences are embedded can be addressed and explored. The author uses three interlocking structural equation models to define a set of

relations between high levels of parental stress, parents' disrupted family management skills (e.g. failure to teach reasonable levels of compliance and inability to control minor coercive behaviors), and antisocial behavior (e.g. non-compliance, coerciveness and physical aggression) in the child. The author found that as the mutually coercive behaviors escalate and parent-child interaction becomes increasingly strained, the child's antisocial behaviors outside the home such as disrupted peer relations and school problems, increase.

Thus, behavioral sequences can be seen as visible legacies of larger and more internally stabilized patterned responses which involve an interpretive factor and encompass family functioning through time (Patterson, 1986; Reiss, 1989). For instance, in the above illustration, while the boy's father may walk away rather than try to make his son do his chores simply due to an oft-repeated sequential pattern, that pattern may also be elicited and maintained by the father's deep-seated belief that a "good parent" doesn't cause his son a moment's discomfort, which meshes with the son's equally firm conviction that "real men" do not help out around the house!

Shared family constructs and family regulation. According to Reiss: "...a shared construct specifies that this family behaves in this way because, collectively, it is convinced that its social environment is (without a doubt) just this kind of world" (1981, p. 382). These shared constructs, such as the mutually reinforcing assumptions noted in the above example, help shape the family's internal dynamics relating to its perception of its strengths and weaknesses as a group as well as the character of its relationships with social systems outside the home.

Reiss (1981) suggests three ways of classifying families based on shared constructs: environment-sensitive, interpersonal-distance sensitive, and consensus-sensitive. Families which are environment-sensitive will tend to see a problem as manageable and solvable and will share their ideas freely while searching for a solution. Members of the interpersonal-distance sensitive families are apt to act individually in their attempts to problem-solve. They often regard input from other members as intrusive, and see employing

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others' solutions as a sign of personal weakness. Consensus-sensit families, on the other hand, can be overly cohesive and use the problem-solving process as a means to maintain closeness through uninterrupted, albeit ineffective, agreement.

Three underlying dimensions which relate to the three family paradigms discussed above were derived from Reiss's Card Sort Procedure: (a) configuration, which is reflected by the family's success in identifying the logical patterns in the cards; (b) coordination, as shown by the level of family cooperation and communication while working together to sort the cards, and closure, as indicated by how flexible the family is when faced with new information once the exercise is underway.

The configuration dimension concerns family differences in ability to grasp subtle and complex patterns in the environment. It reflects the family's shared view that the world is patterned and capable of being mastered. Environment-sensitive families tend to score high on the configuration dimension. Coordination refers to t ability and willingness of family members to develop similar solution to problems based on the notion that consensus is possible. Again, environment-sensitive families tend to score high on this dimension since they are able to share freely among themselves in the problem-solving process. Consensus-sensitive families also exhibit high levels of coordination, but this seems to be due to their tendency to cohere unquestioningly in the face of an environmental challenge. On the closure dimension, the speed at which a conclusion is reached and the degree to which past experience is used to solve present problems is measured to see if the system evolves or changes as new information is reviewed. Environment-sensitive families show a good deal of suspended or delayed closure as they test many hypotheses relating to possible solutions. Closure is hastened for the consensus-sensitive and distance-sensitive families. The consensus-sensitive families strive to maintain continuity and coherence in their explanation of events. In contrast, members of the interpersonal distance-sensitive families have no sense of a common

family universe of explanations and rush to closure so they can return to their private worlds.

The Card Sort Procedure has also been used extensively in settings outside the laboratory. For example, after sample families in a therapeutic multiple-family group performed the CSP, the results were compared with those same families' perceptions of other families in their treatment group (Reiss, Costell, Jones, & Berkman, 1980). In another study, CSP results were correlated with families' views of an inpatient psychiatric service into which an adolescent member had recently been admitted (Costell, Reiss, Berkman, & Jones, 1981). Configuration on the card sort predicted the subtlety of perception of the other families' dynamics on the first study, and of the emotional details of the ward's social system in the second. Coordination was correlated in both studies with a shared view, a similar conception of the immediate social system, by all family members.

Family stories. We can use bounded phenomena, notably family rituals and family stories to broaden our knowledge of the family's shared constructs and regulatory processes. A bounded sequence is a complex pattern of behavior and interaction in families which unfolds over time, tends to repeat itself in form and content, and has a distinct beginning, middle and end. These naturally occurring processes can be evaluated for behaviors and behavioral sequences (e.g. the pattern of family cooperation in ritual enactment or in story construction) and to note the nature of the family's interpretive constructs. They also can be examined to see how these two levels are linked (e.g. how the family's belief system influences commitment to the ritual, or how story themes of fear and danger are reflected in the family's day-to-day interactions).

The role played by family rituals in the alcoholic family illustrates the highly significant, multi-generational influence of bounded sequences in family dynamics (Steinglass, Bennett, Wolin & Reiss, 1987). Rituals conserve the family's shared beliefs, perceptions, values and central norms; they act as transmitters of the family's core identity. If family rituals are invaded and disrupted through ongoing and progressive alcohol abuse, the overall course of

family development can be seriously affected. The family loses a valuable resource for maintaining stability and promoting efficacy daily life. Transmission of values and perspectives to the next generation is also jeopardized.

Family stories offer the researcher an opportunity to measure family process at the levels of behavior, meaning and memory. Stori have the power to capture the imagination, impart information and facilitate learning, offer challenges and warnings in a relatively non-threatening way, model a way of communicating, transmit values, and establish rapport among members (Polster, 1987). Since the act of story-telling is an evolutionary and mutually interpretive process with each telling a new opportunity for re-creation, elaboration and reconciliation, family narratives can be thought of as a "...communal or shared act of historical reconstructions by the family as a group" (Reiss, 1989, p. 32).

There have been several studies of family stories and myths whic explore the part they play in transmitting family values and expectations across generations (Byng-Hall, 1988; Stone, 1988; Zeitlin, Kotkin & Baker, 1982). However, there has been little empirical research until recently on how story themes relate to value transmission and social interaction. In a study which is still in progress, Fiese (1989) videotaped 18 mother-toddler pairs during a 12 minute period of free play, then asked each mother to tell a story about an experience she had as a child to her toddler. The preliminary results from this research indicate that maternal stories of childhood are related to aspects of mother-child interaction. For instance, mothers whose childhood stories had themes of rejection and/or achievement were apt to be less involved and more intrusive when interacting with their toddlers during the free play session; maternal themes of play were negatively related to maternal intrusion. These narratives are now being evaluated (using the Storytelling Outline of Relationships Inventory [STORI] developed by the author) for the themes, setting, relationships of the characters, general affective tone of the story, and the apparent purpose or point.

Discourse analysis and research interviewing offer guidelines for assessing narrative themes and structure, for organizing these into collective representations which form a coherent whole, and for exploring the interplay among the interview participants (Mishler, 1986). Discourse analysis seeks to understand how meaning is grounded in and constructed through the message of the narrative and the way in which the message is presented. The basic theoretical thrust of discourse analysis assumes that talk fulfills many functions and has varying effects, and that discourses are characterized by global patterns or themes which underscore the main topic of the narrative and highlight what is most relevant in the discourse. Mishler has suggested examining narratives (transcribed from interviews) for such components as: 1) coherence of overall account; 2) role of plots and sub-plots in enriching or supporting the main theme; 3) delineation of the underlying theme(s) which comprise the core narrative, and 4) assessment of how the interactional setting affects the narration. The author offers an example of how a narrative can start out with a concrete incident (e.g. a stressful situation), then develop along a theme (e.g. "triumph over adversity") while presenting the narrator as a person with a valid social identity (in this example, someone who is a "responsible-person-who-can-cope-with-and-overcome-difficulties").

Research interviewing is a related method which, in addition to the textual and ideational aspects of the narrative, addresses the mutually reinforcing interplay among all members (including the interviewer) and emphasizes the role of the interview process itself in shaping the outcome of an encounter (Labov & Fanshel, 1977; Mishler, 1986). For example, Mishler (1984) extensively analyzed two contrasting doctor/patient interviews. In the first interview, the physician was responsive and supportive. The conversational focus was on mutual interchange; the patient and physician formed a collaborative relationship as they discussed treatment management. In the second interview, another physician's conversation with a different patient was directed toward fact finding and dissemination of information relating to the disease process (the "voice of medicine"), and largely ignored the patient's eagerness to understand

what his illness meant within his own sociocultural context (the "voice of the lifeworld"). These disparate agendas created a situation whereby the second patient's concerns were not validated nc his questions about his illness addressed. Another intriguing study underscores the co-constructed interview relationship between the listener and the speaker. Condon and Ogston (1967) found that during psychohistory interviews, the physical movements of the listener parallel speech transitions in the patient, and that those parallel interactions are greater when the listener is attracted to and interested in the patient.

The co-construction of the interview between the family members themselves and between the family and the interviewer is considered to be of crucial importance to this study. Not only is the family's reaction to the listener viewed as an indication of how it interacts with the external world, but the listener's response to the family is treated as an important component in shaping the interview process anc outcome. The following examples illustrate different ways the family and listener can regulate the interview process. Our focus is on noting the distinctive patterns families (and listeners) use to handle interpersonal distance and observing the relationship these have to mutual interchanges and story construction, rather than on deciding if one way is "more desirable" than another.

On one end of the spectrum, when the Jones family is enthusiastically telling about all the embarrassing things which happened during their recent move to the Washington area, members joke and laugh with the listener as if she is an old friend and include her in their narration from the beginning (e.g. saying "You must feel like you're in a zoo with all these names" when they are introducing the cast of characters). The listener responds by becoming even more active and supportive than is customary, and "joins" the family in their banter. At times, the listener seems distracted by the camaraderie; the interview becomes more like a free-flowing chat among friends. When the coder reads the narrative, there are several confusing and rambling passages.

At the other end, the Brown family seems much more private as it tells about the son's first job. Members answer politely but briefly, whenever the listener asks a question; they offer little information about themselves or the event unless specifically asked. As the story unfolds, the listener seems to get quieter and more subdued, stops trying to encourage the family to talk, and eventually asks only the required questions. To the coder, the narrative transcript seems sparse and unidimensional. The coder never obtains a clear picture of this family's problem-solving style and belief system even though it seems to be very well understood by all the family members.

To inform the development of our coding method, then, we will use guidelines derived from the several bodies of research discussed above: microsocial analysis, shared family constructs and family regulation, qualitative examinations of family stories, and protocols from discourse analysis and research interviewing.

Design and Method

Developing a coding method. To create measures which can address both the behavioral and interpretive facets of family narratives and the family interview, we first had to: (a) draw on a method, developed by Oliveri and Reiss (1981) for eliciting accounts of family problem-solving in a systematic, standardized fashion using the family as the unit of analysis; (b) construct a theory of family regulation as manifested through the storytelling process; (c) extract descriptions of family interaction from existing data which would be most apt to evaluate the interplay among functional links of behavior and the interpretive process, and (d) translate these descriptions (using protocols from research interviewing and discourse analysis as guidelines) into a method which can code the narratives reliably.

a. Eliciting the stories. This first phase has been accomplished. Oliveri and Reiss selected 44 families (all consisting of two parents and two adolescents, who were the only children living in the family home) who were recruited through local Parent-Teacher-Associations. These non-clinical volunteers were primarily from middle class socio-economic backgrounds. The purpose of the study was to explore the differences among the families in

their responses to moderately stressful situations. It was hypothesized that each family's shared construing would play a cruc role in how that family reacted to and discussed stressful occurrences. The entire family selected an event (e.g. "Parent Changes Jobs" or "Family Member is Hospitalized") which occurred within the past year from a list of 82 incidents rated by another family sample in a previous study as being moderately stressful and fairly common. Then the members, responding as a group, described ho they, as a family, reacted to the first event. Upon completion of that story, the family chose and discussed a second event. A total o 84 narratives (44 first stories and 40 second) was audiotaped, then converted at a later date into the verbatim written transcripts we ar using in this project.

The listener asked a few requisite questions regarding key aspects of the problem-solving process during the narration, but the family was generally given free reign to describe the event in its ow words. If necessary, the listener structured the interview more thoroughly (e.g. by interrupting tangential interchanges, or inviting the more silent members to expand on the story). Every effort was made to include each family member in the ensuing discussion, thereby promoting group participation in the narrative's construction. Oliveri and Reiss evaluated the narratives (using a five-point scale) on 41 aspects of family dynamics. Data analysis yielded four factors relating to: (a) the family members' uniform perception about the event and their sensitivity to each other's points of view; (b) the level of mental involvement with and behavioral response to the event; (c) the extent of emotional involvement and the degree to which the event is seen as a issue affecting the entire family group, and (d) the family's appraisal of the outcome of the event.

b. Constructing a theory of family regulation as manifested through the storytelling process. The coding method examines aspects of family dynamics at both the level of behavior and its sequences and at the level of meaning and memory. The behavioral portion was informed in part by existing research on the naturally occurring repeated behaviors which serve an organizing function in parent-child

interaction (Patterson, 1982; Stern, 1989) and family processes (Constantine, 1986; Reiss, 1989). The interpretive constructs such as the family's world view and ongoing aspects of family temperament and identity, were drawn from discussions of underlying family dynamics (Berg, 1985; Reiss, 1981) and from theme coding protocols in discourse analysis (Mishler, 1986). In particular, we have used characteristics of Reiss's (1981) three family paradigms (environment-sensitive, interpersonal-distance sensitive and consensus-sensitive) and their underlying dimensions (configuration, coordination and closure) as reference points throughout coding construction.

c. Choosing descriptors of family interaction which would evaluate the interplay among functional links of behavior and the interpretive process. Two major aspects of the narratives are addressed in the coding in order to tap into the different levels of family process: (a) the act of co-constructing the story during the interview (how the family members interact among themselves, how the family presents itself to the interviewer, and the interviewer's overt response to the family), and (b) the family's remembered account of how it coped with the stressor at the time it occurred. Descriptors were chosen to reflect aspects of family communication, boundary maintenance, cohesiveness, and characteristics such as vitality, flexibility and humor (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). We also included indicators which addressed the more interpretive constructs, such as family values and beliefs, investment in the narrative process, perceived shared impact of the event, and family affirmation and event closure (Reiss, 1989). Two descriptors measure characteristics of the narrative: coherence of presentation and story richness.

Many of the variables involve sequentially patterned interactions among family members, such as the ways in which the Smith family members enrich one another's comments to create a memorable story about the dying cat. Mutually reinforcing interactions between the family and the listener are also measured (e.g. the Jones family creates such a strong rapport with the listener that she doesn't always notice when the members are rambling on rather aimlessly; the

Brown family's short answers and strong sense of privacy seem to create a parallel quietness and reticence in the listener).

d. Developing coding protocols. We used guidelines from discourse analysis and research interviewing to choose indicators which could assess the fit among the levels of behavior, meaning and memory. After multiple trial-and-error revisions of the manual, we were able to create a detailed guideline discussing each dimension's properties with precise descriptions and examples of coding criteria for each indicator. The manual allows the coder to discriminate amon the five points on the scale for each of the 12 indicators, and to make informed coding decisions based on objective as well as subjective data. As we discussed earlier, we are primarily interested in exploring differences among families as we use this new method, an not with determining an "ideal" prototype. Also, since these are non clinical volunteers, families at the extreme ranges of the continuum are placed there only in relation to the other families in this study and not because their styles would necessarily be extreme outside of this sample.

A brief overview of the dimensions and their indicators. At this point, we would like to summarize a few of the characteristics of the dimensions and give a very brief overview of each indicator. The outer points on the five point scale are noted in parentheses.

I. HOW THE FAMILY PRESENTS ITSELF measures the family's outward characteristics as experienced by the coder.

A. VITALITY: (Very High Vitality - Very Serene)

1.Pacing of Conversation notes if the story "spills out" with a sense of urgency, or if the pace seems stilted and halting so the listener must almost "pull the story out piece by piece."

2. The level of Group Liveliness decides to what extent the group is rather serene and calm or "bouncy" and energetic.

B. BEHAVIORAL RANGE:

(Very High Flexibility - Very Tradition-Oriented)

1. The existence of Family Rules and/or Assumptions in the story content and family interaction while the narrative is unfolding.

2. The Use of an "All-Purpose" Solution or Response notes if the family prefers using a "tried-and-true" approach when handling the stressor, and notes if that approach seemed to be effective.

3. Willingness to Try a New Approach: Did the family use an unexpected or novel strategy to cope with the dilemma? Would they be willing to modify their more traditional response in the future?

C. HUMOR (Very High Humor - Very Little Humor)

1. The extent of Teasing, Joking, Laughter and Playfulness among members during the narration.

II. THE FAMILY'S RELATIONS WITH THE EXTERNAL WORLD assesses the reciprocal interaction between the family and the listener.

A. INCLUSION OF THE LISTENER INTO THE FAMILY'S INTERACTIONS:

(Very Strong Inclusion - Almost No Inclusion)

1. Talking to, Versus Talking Past, the Listener measures the extent to which the family includes the listener by making her aware of implied aspects of the story and filling her in on details (e.g. cast of characters, background information or inside jokes).

2. Affectual Engagement with the Listener: Is the listener treated politely but rather distantly, or as if she/he is an old friend...almost "one of the family?" Is highly personal, even embarrassing, information revealed during the interview?

B. LISTENER'S ENHANCEMENT OF THE STORY:

(Very Strong Enhancement - Very Little Enhancement)

1. The extent of Listener Encouragement and Support measures how much of an effort the listener makes in creating a warm and affirmative atmosphere; does she try to put the family at ease?

2. Promotion of Story Flow can be determined by noting if the listener keeps the family "on track," and asks questions and makes comments designed to promote story expansion and embellishment.

III. INTRA-FAMILY CONNECTEDNESS notes the extent to which the family works smoothly and enthusiastically together while they are telling the story, and the degree to which the event affects the entire group.

A. GROUP PROMOTION IN TELLING THE STORY:

(Very Strong Group Effort - Little or No Group Effort)

1. The extent to which **Each Member Helps Propel the Story Forward** by acknowledging and expanding on others' comments.

2. The extent to which the **Momentum of the Story is Interrupted by Conflict, Tangential Interchanges, or Side Comments** from family members is noted.

3. The degree of **Effort the Listener Must Expend to Help the Family Tell Its Story** indicates how much the family can, on its own, create the story and maintain the narrative's momentum and clarity.

B. GROUP INVESTMENT IN TELLING THE STORY:

(Very High Investment - Low Investment)

The extent to which **All Members Have an Equal Stake in Telling the Story** measures the evenness of distribution of family investment by noting each member's participation (e.g. as shown by their spontaneous comments).

2. **Family Eagerness to Recount the Story** assesses the level of each member's enthusiasm to tell the listener the story, to want the listener to know about how the family coped with the stressor.

C. SHARED IMPACT ON THE FAMILY:

(Very Strong Group Impact - Very Little Group Impact)

1. The extent to which the **Family Sees the Event as Affecting the Entire Group** (even if only one member was directly involved) is usually greater if the event relates to something central and important to the family's belief system (such as death of a grandparent or a child's school failure might do).

IV. STORY STRUCTURE focusses on the outcome of the narrative process: was the story well-constructed and readable; were there enough details and examples to make the story interesting and vivid?

A. COHERENCE OF PRESENTATION:

(Extremely Coherent - Not at All Coherent)

1. **The Story's Sense of Order, Composition and Logical Evolution** is measured in this indicator. Does the story flow freely? Is there a clear beginning, middle and end, or does the story ramble along rather aimlessly? Does the coder find it easy to follow?

B. STORY RICHNESS (Very Rich Story - Very Sparse Story)

1. The extent to which the Family Uses Side Stories, Examples and Details to enhance and expand the narrative (and the degree to which they underscore and strengthen the main story line).

V. FAMILY AFFIRMATION AND CLOSURE addresses the degree to which the family's image is clearly presented and event processing and closure achieved.

A. CLARITY OF FAMILY IMAGE:

(Extremely Clear Family Image - Not at All Clear Family Image)

1. The extent to which the Content of the Narrative and the Interview Process Paint a Vivid Picture of the Family measures how clearly the family's world view and problem-solving style are depicted for the coder during the course of the narration and how much the family "comes alive" with a clear and well-defined image.

2. The Family's Values, Beliefs and Assumptions can be explicitly stated (e.g. "We always help each other"), implied in the story content (such as seen in the helping behaviors of the Smith family who adopted the sick cat) or inferred from family interaction during the narration (e.g. the Jones family's openness probably reflects its view of the world as a welcoming and friendly place).

B. COMPLETION OF EVENT PROCESSING:

(Definitely Completed - Not at All Complete)

1. The extent to which Processing the Event Seems Finished from the Family's Perspective measures whether the family feels there is anything left to attend to or to discuss later, or if there is agreement that coping with the stressor is finished.

2. The extent to which Processing the Event Seems Finished from the Coder's Perspective. Even though the family may say it is finished, the coder may see indications (such as conflict, cutting off communication about parts of the event, or unrealistic expectations) which suggest that the family is not at all finished coping with the stressor. An example would be: "We decided to ignore our 14 year old's episode of getting drunk with his friends; still we're sure he will never touch another drop of beer again."

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FAMILY CONTINUITY relates to aspects of family process over time, is measured on a separate scale which notes if the indicators are eithe prominently featured in the narrative and/or clearly meaningful to t family, or if there is little or no mention of the following:

A. CONNECTION WITH TRADITIONS: assesses whether Rituals, Ceremonies, Symbols and/or Other Traditions are Featured, or Clearly Meaningful to the Family.

B. CONNECTION WITH EXTENDED FAMILY: notes whether or not the Families of Origin and/or Extended Families Are Woven Into the Story such as choosing a relative's divorce as the story's topic, or references made to family assumptions, mottoes and expectations ("We Smiths come from a long line of helpful people; it's in our genes").

Finally, in addition to rating the above indicators, the coder is asked to suggest what that family's world view, theme or motto might be, and to give a brief subjective description of the family.

Methodological issues. Two major methodological issues must be addressed: (1) using the family as the unit of analysis and (2) accuracy in measuring the dimensions.

1. The family as the unit of analysis. Assessing families as a single unit, rather than by creating a composite score from four separate individuals increases coding complexity. However, Reiss (1981) asserts that the family can and should be viewed as an entity in itself, greater than the sum of its parts. In this study, the family acting as a group has agreed upon the events to be discussed; every member of the household is present and contributes to the interview, and the interviewer's questions are designed to address the family as a single entity. In addition, the coding manual gives examples (where appropriate) evaluating the extent to which the family participates as a unit for each level of the five-point scale. For instance, a family where each member actively expands the narrative and fosters construction of a coherent story will be placed in a higher category on "Group Promotion in Telling the Story" than a family where one member keeps interrupting the narration with tangential asides and another cannot keep track of the story.

2. Accuracy in assessment. In order to grasp another, more abstract level of analysis, it is necessary for us to take a step into the subjective realm. This invites a less precise, less verifiable mode of measurement, but allows us to incorporate the interpretive component which plays such a crucial part in shaping behavioral interchanges. For example, while lack of absolutes (e.g. coding the number of times a family member laughs) may decrease coding precision, it should serve to increase coding richness (e.g. measuring the overall level of family humor as an interactive process both within the family [as a way to relieve tension], and between the family and the listener [as a way to engage the listener]).

Content validity, then, offers the most interesting and challenging problem, since unlike the coding for a content analysis or a sequential transaction, these narratives will also be coded for what is not there, not easily discerned, not neatly quantifiable. Since meaning is by definition an inferred construct, its interpretation is dependent on the coder's expertise and ability to grasp subtle themes and restore missing context (Mishler, 1986). While apprehending the narrative's theme and underlying processes presents a significant opportunity for bias, several researchers have presented compelling arguments that accurate assessment is feasible (Mehan & Wood, 1975; Mishler, 1986; Reiss, 1989).

Coding reliability. Coding reliability will be promoted by: (a) using narratives which are elicited under structured conditions and are faithfully transcribed; (b) devising a detailed and clearly defined coding manual; (c) carefully training coders in coding methods and procedures, and (d) randomly comparing results during the coding to determine if coders are still coding reliably.

Besides the first author (who is the criterion coder), we are using two graduate students to code the 84 narratives. The coders have been carefully selected and painstakingly trained to follow the strict guidelines regarding coding decisions throughout the manual. We are now in the process of coding the narratives, using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) to determine interrater reliability (Bartko, 1976). To minimize reliability drift and

maximize coder agreement, the coder's assessments are being randomly checked and compared with those of the criterion coder at least twice during the coding process. Reliability in our preliminary analyses ranges from ICC = .60 to ICC = .90. for most indicators. We expect t complete this phase by early fall. At that time, we will begin analyzing the data.

Data Analysis. Relationships among the twelve indicators will be analyzed to determine if these variables can be grouped into distinctly different dimensions. We will then: (a) compare and contrast the indicators and their dimensions among themselves; (b) examine associations among the indicators and dimensions and the family's underlying theme and correlate these with indicators of family continuity; (c) explore the relationship between the results on the first story with those of the second, and (d) correlate many of these findings with demographic data and aspects of family regulation for this sample as measured by the Card Sort Procedure.

Contribution. This method offers a new way for both researchers and clinicians to explore the multifaceted aspects of family processes through: (a) using family narratives and the act of storytelling to assess levels of behavior, meaning and memory; (b) developing a coding manual which measures the interpretive and behavioral processes and addresses the fit between them; (c) using the relationship between the listener and the family to examine family dynamics; (d) including the listener's interaction with the family as an integral part of the method, and (e) incorporating the coder's subjective response where appropriate.

After this maiden effort is completed, the coding method and manual will be refined and revised where needed. We plan to use the method in empirical studies in other settings to see if coding reliability can be achieved with diverse family groups. If so, our method of measurement can then be employed in analyses which explore the correlates and consequences of family stress and family efficacy in research and practice.

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